Gustav Teichmüller and the Systematic Significance of Studying the History of Concepts

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The history of concepts is relevant in philosophy because conceptual distinctions fundamentally shape cognition. Because these conceptual distinctions are deeply entrenched in our way of thinking, we are not usually aware of this influence. How we view the world depends crucially on the concepts we have. These concepts, however, are the products of their history. Following Herbart, Gustav Teichmüller viewed philosophy as the systematic analysis and refinement of concepts. Refining concepts in such a way allows us to make new distinctions, or to transform or abandon old ones. In contrast to Herbart, Teichmüller emphasized that this process presupposes detailed historical studies. This does not mean, however, that Teichmüller embraced a kind of historicism—the view that philosophy and its history are one and the same thing. On the contrary, he derogatorily referred to such a view as "historical psychology." Rather, the history of concepts in Teichmüller's sense has to be understood as a history of problems which are reflected in conceptual distinctions. This means that the history of concepts, which brings to light explicit and implicit distinctions, can be applied as a kind of hermeneutics of world views—as the basis on which we can systematically reconstruct concepts in a new light. It is the aim of this presentation to unfold such an understanding of the history of concepts in view of Teichmüller's contribution to it.

Keywords: categorial distinctions, concepts and metaphors, definitions, history of concepts, explications, Eucken, Teichmüller

The philosopher Gustav Teichmüller (who was born in 1832) held the chair of philosophy at the University of Tartu (Dorpat) from 1871 until his early death in 1888. He was one of the first to systematically study the history of concepts. Through this interest, he paved the way for what was to become the most comprehensive representation of the history of concepts to date: the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (*Historical Dictionary of Philosophy*, 13 volumes), a project which was begun in 1971 and completed in 2007.

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It is my aim here to lay out the significance of the history of concepts for philosophy, in order then (in the second part of my considerations) to give credit to Teichmüller's contributions to the theory and praxis of the study of the history of concepts.[1]

The term 'history of concepts' is itself not without problems. Strictly speaking, concepts do not have a history. As the logician Gottlob Frege accurately noted, "What is usually called the history of concepts is in fact either a history of our cognition of these concepts or a history of the meaning of words" (Frege 1884, vii). In this passage, Frege tacitly refers to his Jena colleague Rudolf Eucken. (Eucken and Gustav Teichmüller were both strongly influenced by Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg, who was the first to demand an investigation of the history of concepts.)[2] However, Eucken more cautiously speaks of the "history of philosophical terminology," thus already meeting Frege's concerns. Terminologies, of course, do have a history: we can make out at which point in time a certain term (denoting a specific concept or conceptual distinction) came into use. Insofar as we are concerned with conceptual distinctions, we are justified in speaking of their history. This is because *distinctions*, in contrast to *differences*, are made, i.e. they are drawn, altered, specified, and given up *in time*—that is to say, at a specific time. In this sense, the history of concepts is really a history of conceptual distinctions and definitions.

The significance of the history of concepts for philosophy is sometimes overestimated; however, it is also commonly underestimated. It is overestimated when philosophy and its history are equated. Philosophy as a thinking in concepts is then identified with the *history* of philosophical concepts. Against this view, we should maintain that philosophy is not a historical, but a systematic discipline. However, this should not be taken to mean that we can practice philosophy by completely disregarding its history. On the other hand, the significance of the history of concepts is often underestimated because the role conceptual distinctions play in cognition is underestimated. Cognition is commonly understood in terms of propositions. It is propositions, statements, judgments, and assertions to which truth and falsity have been ascribed ever since Aristotle, through Kant and Frege, up until modern logic and philosophy of science. On this view, the concept of cognition is closely tied to the concept of truth, and cognition is hence limited to a

[1] A short appraisal of these contributions can be found in (Meier 1971); for Teichmüller, see in particular pp. 802–804. More generally for Teichmüller, see Heiner Schwenke's monograph (2006) and the article ""A Star of the First Magnitude within the Philosophical World"—Introduction to Life and Work of Gustav Teichmüller" in the present volume.

[2] Concerning Trendelenburg's, Teichmüller's and Eucken's impact on the history of concepts cf. (Hühn 2009).

propositional understanding of knowledge. (I cannot go into a critique of this problematic restriction of cognition to propositional knowledge here.) However, definitions are not propositional statements, but rather normative determinations of the use of expressions. Although they may grammatically be treated as statements, logically or semantically, they clearly form a distinct class. Even in cases where definitions take into account existing or earlier uses of a word, they still cannot be ascribed a truth value. For this reason, they are denied all cognitive value, in line with the propositional concept of knowledge.

Such a view is carried to the extreme when it turns into the thesis of the arbitrariness of definitions. According to this thesis, definitions are merely arbitrary stipulations of the use of a sign that only serve the purpose of economy—or at least that is what they should ideally be. The origins of the arbitrariness thesis can be traced back to Hobbes and Pascal, but it has found especially many adherents within modern logic and philosophy of mathematics, in which formal systems play an important role. I believe that this thesis is mistaken at its very core. It is not even true of formal languages, much less in other contexts. Of course, it *may* happen that an arbitrarily chosen sign is introduced as an abbreviation of a more complex one. However, this is clearly not what *typically* happens in definitions. As an example, consider the calculus of propositional logic. It is possible to define one logical connective through others (with the help of the negation). The knowledge of this possibility is a deep logical insight and these definitions are certainly not arbitrary, except in the sense that the choice of logical symbols is arbitrary, i.e. conventional. The relevant equations of meaning, however, are not at all arbitrary; and hence, the definitions are by no means merely arbitrary stipulations. Rather, they should be considered *explications* which provide us with an insight into the logical structure underlying our language. As such, these definitions are subject to criteria of adequacy. They seem arbitrary only as long as we artificially pretend to be concerned with mere symbols of formal languages. As soon as we assign a meaning to these symbols (and without such a meaning, formal languages are without relevance), there is no longer any appearance of arbitrariness. In fact, even formal languages are not constructed arbitrarily, but rather with possible interpretations in mind. In other words: a strict separation between syntax and semantics is possible only for practical purposes, but not in principle.

Now, let us consider entries in dictionaries concerned with the history of concepts. What we have here are descriptive diagnoses about language use and concept formations, i.e. true or false statements. If we want to speak of *definitions* at all here, we should distinguish them as *lexical* definitions from *normative* definitions. What such lexical definitions in historical dic-

tionaries describe, however, are often the normative determinations of other authors. These are normative at least in the sense that they do not take into account all aspects of the meaning of a given term: with a view to the respective aim, some aspects are emphasized while others are eliminated. Definitions change the way concepts are used. Because the use of words stands for distinctions, definitions intervene in our structuring of the world. This also explains the existence of the so-called mere "verbal dispute," which is often unjustly condemned. In many cases, what is argued about here are not mere words, but the linguistic and hence the conceptual structuring of the world.

Accordingly, the definitions that are relevant are *not* mere linguistic abbreviations. Rather, they must be regarded as reconstructive explications which structure our conceptions in a new way. This already happens in the configuration of the definiens, in concept formation. In this process, concepts are not only formed through explicit definitions, but also and more importantly when new understandings arise gradually and tacitly. Definitions are simply the place where the will to structure concepts in a new way becomes most apparent. In particular, the most fundamental insights, which shape our understanding of the world, become manifest in distinctions. Without these distinctions, it is impossible to think propositional knowledge: they form the categorical framework that makes our claims to propositional knowledge possible. If we ascribe distinctions the merely preliminary role of paving the way for "real", i.e., propositional knowledge, then we disguise a more adequate understanding of the epistemic role of these distinctions. On closer inspection, we find that often the reverse relation holds between propositions and definitions: propositions are true or false depending on the distinctions drawn in advance. This insight is not without consequences, in particular for philosophy as a thinking in concepts, a discipline which is neither concerned with formal deductions nor with empirical verification. In philosophy, cognition essentially takes place through categorical distinctions. Philosophical cognition even consists in cognition of distinctions, as Plato's dialogues already confirm. We should therefore be careful not to overemphasize the apophantic character of philosophy. True, philosophy is concerned with justifications. However, it is not so much the truth of statements that is justified, but rather the adequacy of distinctions. Philosophical *statements* about the essence of something are, in most cases, *definitions* of that essence in disguise. These definitions, in turn, represent normative distinctions.

In sum, philosophical discourse consists not so much in the justification (and critique) of propositional statements (or assertions), but rather in the justification (and critique) of categorical distinctions. It follows that the history of concepts plays an important role in providing a reliable hermeneutic

foundation for philosophical discourse. In the vast majority of cases, basic insights amount to seeing (or making others see) things differently 'in the light of' new distinctions which open up a new perspective. The insight into distinctions can—in a similar way to the perception of *gestalts*—reverse our entire perspective on something. This is not only true of philosophy, which is permanently concerned with categorical explications, but also of the sciences. For example, T. S. Kuhn presumes that all scientific revolutions have been reflected in a new understanding of old terms (Kuhn 1996, 198). Hence, the so-called paradigm changes always involve modifications of the most fundamental conceptual distinctions. The history of the sciences has thus proved a fruitful area of application for the history of concepts as a history of problems. In this context we should remember that while everyday language and philosophical terms are authorities we need to respect, we should also take care (as with all authorities) not to follow them blindly. Accordingly, the history of concepts and the history of problems are not opponents, as is often claimed. On the contrary, the two work hand in hand and complement each other. We can find indications of such a view already in Teichmüller—which leads me to the second part of my considerations.

Because to Teichmüller "philosophy consists solely in concepts," he ultimately understands the discipline in the sense of the philosopher Johann Friedrich Herbart as the systematic "analysis and refinement of concepts" (Herbart 1813, §1). But, in contrast to Herbart, Teichmüller emphasized that this process presupposes detailed historical studies, in which the distinctions to be refined are first of all unfolded in their historical development (Teichmüller 1874, ii–ix).[3] The "history of concepts" identifies the "motifs of each theory and the courses which each concept has subjected to its rule, but also the collisions with other truths and the dismissal of misplaced claims to power" (Teichmüller 1874, iii).[4] With reference to Trendelenburg, Teichmüller explicitly rejects the attempt to "merge philosophy with cultural history and national literature" (Teichmüller 1876, vi). It is thus clear that although Teichmüller is, at first glance, concerned with authors, with the great "names of philosophy," what he really wants is to solve systematic philosophical problems. Hence, his history of concepts concentrates on the history of *problems*. We are justified in counting Teichmüller among the founders of the study of the history of concepts—but it also has to be emphasized that he does not embrace any kind of historicism, the view that philosophy and its history are one and the same thing. On the contrary, Teichmüller derogatorily refers to such a view as "historical psychology" (Teichmüller 1876, v).

[3] Reprint (1966, v–xi; for some absurd reason, the Roman pagination has been altered in the reprint). Cf. (Dyroff 1940, xivf).

[4] Reprint (1966, v).

With a view to Teichmüller's complete works, it may seem tempting to regard him primarily as a historian of philosophy, if only for quantitative reasons. This impression is reinforced by the fact that his investigations concentrate mainly on Greek philosophy—at times he explicitly goes back even further and also includes oriental philosophy. The focus on Greek philosophy in particular is due to the real history of concepts: "Because our philosophy is based almost entirely on the Greeks, the main work of the historian has to be devoted to the origins of our concepts in Greek philosophy" (Teichmüller 1876, vf). Teichmüller believes that if we were to disregard the concepts of Greek origin, all that would remain would be "a meagre bunch of original concepts" (Teichmüller 1878, 259). In addition, he criticises the lack of real understanding of the concepts of Greek origin, which is due to the fact that they have been taken over "in a rather ambiguous and unclear form" (Teichmüller 1878, 259). He therefore demands: back to the roots. In this backwards movement, Teichmüller is convinced that it will become clear that much of what seems to be "new discoveries" has in fact already been "proved or refuted" long ago. (Teichmüller 1878, 260) This quote shows that Teichmüller's main interest is not directed at historical beliefs and their genesis as such. Rather, the issue is to find an answer to the systematic question of their validity: beliefs have to be scrutinised with regard to their truth or falsehood. What Teichmüller aims at—in line with Plato—is to turn belief into knowledge, even if this is not always apparent in the details of his individual studies. This aim clearly distinguishes Teichmüller from the purely historical, detached representation of Greek philosophy which treats great and small minds in a similar manner. Such a merely-historical treatment of Greek philosophy can be found, for instance, in Eduard Zeller's well-known comprehensive work *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer historischen Entwicklung* (Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy. Zeller 1856–1868). In Teichmüller's view, such a representation leads to the misunderstanding that the thoughts of Greek philosophers are part of "a fusty antiquarian world alien to us," which does not deserve any systematic interest (Teichmüller 1878, 258f).

Although Teichmüller's works concerning the history of concepts make up by far the greatest part of his publications, his understanding of philosophy is a systematic one, as his chief works *Die wirkliche und die scheinbare Welt* (*The Real and the Illusionary World*) and *Religionsphilosophie* (*Philosophy of Religion*) demonstrate. This systematic understanding is concealed by the facts that such works were published comparatively late and that Teichmüller did not live long enough to further develop his systematic philosophy.[5] I am not here concerned with this part of Teichmüller's work,[6] al-

[5] In this context, see (Teichmüller 1889) and (Teichmüller 1940).

[6] For a consideration of Teichmüller's systematic philosophy, see (Schwenke 2006). There is

though I should mention that I take a critical stance on its metaphysical orientation, which goes back beyond Kant to Leibniz. But what is more central to me here is Teichmüller's understanding of the history of concepts, according to which the study of conceptual history is not an end in itself, but rather serves a preliminary purpose as the "first condition" for the "advancement of philosophy" (Teichmüller 1874, iii);[7] "for in our contemporary philosophy, there is still a lot of work to be done, in order to master the complex problems of its research more easily through a view of the simple and transparent motifs of its origins, and in order not to follow paths that lead into dead ends and whose fruitlessness can be discovered in history" (Teichmüller 1874, iiif). The historical development of basic philosophical concepts is thus presented in order to place them within a "topography" for critical and systematic purposes. Teichmüller even goes so far as to claim that "every concept, like every point in space, has its place in the general system of concepts, a place which is fixed and inevitably determined through definite conditions" (Teichmüller 1886, 16). The notion of a system causes Teichmüller to explicitly distance himself from the "analysis and refinement of concepts" in Herbart's sense. He thus emphasizes that it is not possible to "tear a problem apart from the systems as a whole" (Teichmüller 1874, iv).[8] Teichmüller concentrates on the central concepts; but these, too, rather serve to outline the paths along which his investigation moves. He did not want to present a "handbook;" (Teichmüller 1874, vi)[9] in its form, his project is committed to historiography, which always keeps in mind the *context* of the concepts concerned. Teichmüller was devoted to the goal of producing a "collection of all philosophical concepts developed so far," (Teichmüller 1874, vi) in order to "document the inventory of philosophy." However, he is still far away from a historical *dictionary* of philosophy with its alphabetical order. It was Eucken who began seriously considering such a project. In line with Trendelenburg, he stated a "demand for the creation of an encyclopaedia of philosophical terminology" before Teichmüller (Eucken 1872/1873, 81). Both authors, Eucken and Teichmüller, attest to each other the significance of a history of concepts and terminology. For example, Eucken writes in a letter to Teichmüller with reference to the latter's *Studien zur Geschichte der Begriffe* (*Studies in the History of Concepts*): "I think the whole work concerning the history of concepts is very fruitful, for it greatly assists the clarity of concepts and therefore also aids the task of our times."[10] This quote emphasizes once more that the pri-

a new edition of Teichmüller's systematic works (Teichmüller 2014).

[7] Reprint (1966, v).

[8] Reprint (1966, vi). Cf. (Teichmüller 1876, x).

[9] Reprint (1966, viii).

[10] Letter Jena 20.11.1875, in: (Szyłkarski 1940, 426f).

mary aim of a history of concepts is a systematic one: namely, the clarification of concepts. Teichmüller, in turn, also recognises Eucken's *Geschichte der philosophischen Termini im Umriss* (*Outline of the History of Philosophical Terminology*) for its relevance to the present: "There is an astonishing amount of effort put into this, and every new philosopher will have to make use of it."[11]

Even though Teichmüller, in contrast to Eucken, speaks of a history of concepts rather than of terminology, the two philosophers agree in principle. This is because Teichmüller is convinced that the formation of concepts and that of terminology are closely related. With reference to Leibniz, he calls for the definition of concepts, for the transformation of clear into distinct concepts: "I have always thought that not only the learner, but also the researcher can only really make any progress when they look for definitions, and moreover, when they have mastered them" (Teichmüller 1940, 1). But despite this systematic position, Teichmüller is not blind to how the philosophical classics actually apply definitions. For example, he notes that Aristotle, despite his constant striving to work out a strict terminology, sometimes makes use of expressions that "are totally foreign to his system and contradict it," particularly in passages that are not concerned with the explication of his own views (Teichmüller 1869, 5). In any case, concepts are intimately linked to definitions as terminological determinations, or at least with the attempts at such determinations. Teichmüller's understanding of concepts, which is thus tied to terminology, (rightly) leads him to distinguish between concepts and ideas, and hence also between the history of concepts and the history of ideas (Teichmüller 1878, 261f).

Concepts are distinct from ideas in that their formation is carried out as "conscious mental work (*Gedankenarbeit*)." A history of concepts therefore presupposes an attempt at terminological determinations on the part of the authors investigated. Ideas, by contrast, can shape thought even when they are pre-conceptual or conceptually undetermined, as is the case in religion, politics, or arts. Accordingly, the history of ideas "has to include mythology in the first place, and then also the whole of cultural history." The history of concepts is therefore a subarea of the history of ideas, and is only concerned with the transformation of ideas into concepts through more or less precise definitions. Teichmüller emphasizes in this context that philosophical concepts cannot be considered in isolation. Other areas, such as theology,[12] psychology, and the sciences have to be included in the considerations of philosophical concepts. The *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* has followed this advice through its extension to all disciplines. In Te-

[11] Letter from Teichmüller to Eucken, Dorpat 28.11.78, in: (Szyłkarski 1940, 432).
[12] This is represented in particular in (Teichmüller 1873).

ichmüller's own works the sciences are taken into account, for instance, in his investigations of Heraklit's conceptualisations. Teichmüller notes that the innovation in his investigation is to show how "physics precedes metaphysics" (Teichmüller 1876, viii). This approach has been widely accepted, among others by Hermann Lotze—at the time the most respected German philosopher. Teichmüller could therefore note: "Through my studies concerning the history of concepts, I came to the conclusion (which, strangely enough, has to be considered a novel insight) that *an understanding of the metaphysics of the ancients inevitably presupposes an acquaintance with their physics*" (Teichmüller 1878, 273). Another example of how Teichmüller includes other disciplines in the study of the history of philosophical concepts is the consideration of anatomy and physiology in his analysis of practical reason in Aristotle (Teichmüller 1879).[13]

It is an essential characteristic of Teichmüller's approach that he follows the hermeneutic principle of charity, i.e. that he assumes the authors considered to be rational and consistent.[14] The adherence to this principle demonstrates that Teichmüller's main interest is directed at the history of *problems* with a view to the possibility of a systematic reconstruction of philosophical concepts. Here, Teichmüller again meets with Lotze's approval, particularly concerning his interpretation of Plato's theory of forms (ideas). Lotze had, simultaneously with Teichmüller, opposed the traditional interpretation of the Platonic theory of forms, which ascribes to Plato "the absurd view" that forms are entities "that exist separate from material things, and yet have being which resembles that of things" (Lotze 1874, §§317ff).[15] I specifically stress this point because Lotze's interpretation of Plato in the sense of a theory of validity (as opposed to a theory of being) plays a significant role in the reconciliation of Platonism with Kantianism, which eventually led to a transcendental Platonism in the Southwest School of Neo-Kantianism. Lotze's interpretation of the Platonic theory of forms can hence serve us as a good example of how the history of concepts can be made fruitful for the history of problems.

As we have seen, Teichmüller stands on the side of concepts historically as well as systematically. For this reason, he excludes not only the history of ideas from his considerations, but also the history of metaphors. While the

[13] Teichmüller himself notifies Eucken that this volume contained his "most significant studies and very many surprising new ideas along with familiar material" (Letter Dorpat 17.10.78, in: Szyłkarski 1940, 432). In his answer, Eucken confirms Teichmüller's principle according to which the development of the thoughts of philosophers cannot be "considered in isolation," but has to be placed in "a wider context" (Letter Jena 4.1.79, Szyłkarski 1940, 433).

[14] Cf. (Schwenke 2006, 67).

[15] Cf. also (Teichmüller 1878, 263).

reasons for not considering the history of ideas are of a merely practical nature, the history of metaphors is excluded on grounds of principle: according to Teichmüller, it is better to "eliminate all metaphorical expressions wherever possible" (Teichmüller 1940, 1). With this view, we cannot agree anymore.[16] The most fundamental philosophical distinctions in particular are often based on categorical metaphors. Therefore, it is a demand of our times to complement the history of concepts with a history of metaphors. In this respect, Eucken was more progressive than Teichmüller: alongside a history of philosophical terminology, he also had in mind a history of philosophical metaphors. He can thus be regarded as a forerunner of the project of metaphorology developed by Hans Blumenberg (Eucken 1880). Blumenberg lays claim for his metaphorology to lead us to the "substructure of thought" (Blumenberg 1998, 13). This, however, already holds true for the history of conceptual distinctions, insofar as it uncovers the non-propositional substructure of propositional thought.

To summarise the central point of my considerations: Conceptual distinctions present themselves as pre-propositional cognition which fundamentally shapes propositional knowledge. This happens in such a way that we are not usually aware of it. How we view the world crucially depends on the concepts we have. This means that the study of the history of concepts, which brings to light explicit and implicit distinctions, can be applied as a kind of hermeneutics of world views—as the material basis on which we can, with a view to philosophical problems, systematically reconstruct concepts in a new light. Gustav Teichmüller has made a fundamental contribution to such an understanding of the history of concepts.

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[16] Cf. in this context (Gabriel 2009).

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